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Academic Community and Policymaking in Russia

Impact or Detachment?

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This paper is concerned with the role of International Relations (IR) expertise and the academia–policy nexus in contemporary Russia. Drawing on interviews with Russia-based scholars, it posits that while there exist formal channels of knowledge diffusion between academia and the state, there is no clear-cut relationship between knowledge produced in academia and the uses of this knowledge by the state. Scholars’ attitudes towards policy impact, while generally skeptical, span a broad spectrum. Some are convinced that achieving impact is impossible, some declare unwillingness to interact with the policymaking world, while others find providing expert advice difficult but possible under certain conditions.

INTRODUCTION

English-language political science has developed a wide range of theories conceptualizing the relationship between academic knowledge and policymaking.¹ In the discipline of International Relations (IR), Christian Bueger (2014), Bentley Allan (2017), Lorenzo Zambernardi (2016), and Beate Jahn (2017) provide a comprehensive recapitulation of the main arguments driving the debate about the knowledge–policy nexus. One of its features is the recent emergence of “impact” and “political relevance” as concepts animating research. The formalization of the impact agenda among the assessment criteria of scholarly work (Bastow, Dunleavy, and Tinkler 2013; Ní Mhurchú et al. 2016; Smith, Ward, and House 2011) increasingly normalizes the thinking about societal impact as an element of scholarly practice in the discipline of IR. Academics are asked to describe the impact of their work, for instance, as part of the British Research Evaluation Framework, and when applying for major EU-level funding or International Studies Association (ISA) grants.²

Advocates of tighter links between academia and the policymaking world (e.g., Bertucci and Lowenthal 2014; Biersteker 2014; Lowenthal and Bertucci 2014) point to the benefits of bridging the gap between scholars and policymakers, and discuss opportunities for fruitful collaboration and mutually enriching exchange in specific policy areas (Bertucci and Lowenthal 2014). The literature considers interactions between scholars and policymakers in international affairs as potentially productive, even if not always successful (Biersteker 2014). This appraisal is challenged by those who see numerous limitations to knowledge exchange between academia and the policy world. In the foreign-policy-analysis literature such limitations have been debated at least since the early 1990s (Avey and Desch 2014; Byman and Kroenig 2016; George 1993; Newsom 1995; Walt 2005). More recently, the growing political polarization, a distorted market of ideas, and distrust in public institutions, including universities, have nourished the thesis about the eroding authority of traditional sources of foreign-policy expertise (Drezner 2017).

So far, policy impact and the broader theme of a knowledge–policy nexus have generated little attention in the contemporary Russian-language literature or in English-language studies dedicated to Russia.³ Despite unrelenting interest in Russian domestic governance and foreign policy, including a debate on the pages of this journal (Charap and Welt 2015; Laruelle 2015), there exists a clear gap in the understanding of the role of the academic community in policymaking in Russia. Inquiries into the contemporary

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role of news media suggest that media narratives amplify the official discourse (Szostek 2017); we know less about the place and significance of academic expertise.

Russian foreign policymaking is often described as having a “shadowy side” (Baev 2018), and while the inner workings of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs or the Presidential Administration are without doubt difficult to untangle for an outside observer, there are important inroads into the topic. The existing debate on the role of expertise in Russia’s foreign policymaking focuses mainly on the think-tank environment and its institutional development (Efremenko 2017; Pallin and Oxenstierna 2017). One avenue that has not yet been sufficiently explored is scholars’ own assessments of their role in the policymaking process. This approach allows us to engage with statements about the excessive centralization and isolation of foreign policymaking. An additional advantage is that analysis of the academia–policy nexus offers a window into political and social developments in contemporary Russia.⁴

This article analyzes scholars’ own take on the question of policy impact. It explores Russian academic views concerning the limitations and possibilities of contributing to the foreign-policy-making process as well as institutional incentives and disincentives for policy impact. On the basis of in-depth empirical research comprising forty interviews, conducted in the years 2016–2018, with scholars employed at different universities and various institutes of the Russian Academy of Sciences (RAS) in Moscow and St. Petersburg in the social sciences and humanities, I show that the relationship between the state and academic expertise is more complex than that portrayed by existing literature on Russia (Lo 2015; Makarychev and Morozov 2013; Omelicheva and Zubyska 2016).⁵

I acknowledge that the method of semi-structured interviews has its material limitations and its results reflect most closely on the interlocutors and localities available to me at the time of carrying out this research. The method, however, has proved useful in research concerning knowledge production (Müller and de Rijcke 2017; Stevens, Miller-Idriss, and Shami 2018, 3) and policy processes (Owen and Bindman 2017). I conducted the semi-structured, face-to-face interviews in either Russian or English.⁶ The interviewees were selected by analyzing faculty members’ and RAS employees’ profiles available on institutional webpages and subsequently by means of a snow-ball method. About 15 percent of contacted scholars did not respond to the interview request, and some declined participation. The interview involved asking about motivation to do specific research; experience of delivering the results of research to policymakers; and individual assessment of the potential relevance and usefulness of research to foreign-policy-making communities.

Methodological debate concerning interview-based research, including interviews with experts (Bogner, Littig, and Menz 2009; Gläser and Laudel 2009), suggests that interviewees, for various reasons, may wish to withhold information (Napier 2010). However, a bigger pool of respondents and their varied

localization (in terms of cities, institutions, and disciplines) should alleviate the fallout. In the prevalent majority of cases, my impression was that scholars sympathized with the process of collecting data and did their very best to share their experiences and assessments. The size of the interview sample allowed me to analyze interview data without resorting to specialized software. I searched for common themes and approaches. My aim was to derive classifications from interviews rather than attempt to fit data into pre-existing categories derived from literature on foreign-policy making. This choice was motivated by the fact that most of this literature comments on democratic states, while my intention was to be attuned to the specific sociopolitical context of the research–policy nexus in Russia. So as not to overlook the contribution of the existing literature, in the concluding section I offer a comparison of this article’s findings with studies on foreign-policy decision-making in the United States.

The article posits that while there exist some formal channels of knowledge diffusion between academia and the Russian state, there is no clear-cut relationship between knowledge produced in academia and the uses of this knowledge by the state. Two concurrent trends can be identified in the relationship between the academic community and the policymaking world. On the one hand, authorities expect Russian universities to upgrade their position in the international rankings and to participate in the global education and publishing market. On the other hand, the academic community perceives that professional expertise in international relations is not valued by policymakers. While some scholars recognize that their expertise may influence the policymaking process to some extent, provided that they identify the right topic, time, and level of engagement, others see their role as highly curtailed.

The article develops in several steps. First, I introduce the contemporary political context that affects the production of academic expertise. I outline what I identified as the state’s contradictory goals in its approach to the development of academic research and teaching. Next, I show the range of scholarly views on their potential contribution to foreign-policy making. I conclude with a reflection on the paradox of requiring universities to excel and the undervaluing of academic expertise.

THE STATE’S CONTRADICTIONARY GOALS

The approach the Russian government takes toward universities and academic research is marked by several contradictions. On the one hand, the state recurrently displays official messages of concern for the well-being of the academic community.⁷ State officials confirm that scholarly knowledge is valued and should be developed.⁸ Government-sponsored initiatives have been launched to assist universities in climbing international university rankings, in particular the Russian Academic Excellence Project “5–100.” One of the project’s stated aims is the “production of world-class intellectual

products.”⁹ The expected result, to be achieved by 2020, is for at least five universities from the list of 21 project participants to enter the top 100 of the internationally recognized rankings: the Times Higher Education, Quacquarelli Symonds, and Academic Ranking of World Universities. The promotion of the higher-education sector has become an element of public diplomacy and a symbol of Russia’s international status (Mäkinen 2016). There are also a number of channels that in theory facilitate the diffusion of knowledge between academia and the state. On the other hand, the state’s indirect interference with academic research has increased over the last decade and there has been less tolerance for criticism directed at Russia’s foreign policy.

Unlike China, Turkey, or Tajikistan,¹⁰ the Russian government has not openly stepped up its efforts to control research. There are no unambiguous signs of violating academic independence. However, relative freedom of the 1990s and early 2000s has been decreasing since the political turmoil of 2011–2012 and following the 2014 Russian–Ukrainian conflict (Gel’man 2015). Greater state control in contemporary Russia—which encompasses, *inter alia*, the tendency to limit citizens’ freedoms (Lasnier 2017; Tysiachniouk, Tulaeva, and Henry 2018; Wilkinson 2014), stifle protest activity (Bogush 2017; Shulman 2017; van der Vet 2017), and punish activists, journalists and bloggers (Roache 2017); increased interference in the world of mass media (Etkind 2015), art, and culture;¹¹ tighter surveillance of private entrepreneurship (Economist 2017); rising secrecy of national spending (Movchan 2017; Tkachov 2017; Tkachov and Makarov 2017)—all have impacted the broader sociopolitical setting in which academic knowledge production takes place.

In addition to this increasingly difficult context, there appeared several legislative obstacles to research. For instance, the 2012 Law on Foreign Agents had the effect of undermining the authority of several research organizations, such as the Levada Center and the Center for Independent Social Research. In addition, the law introduced uncertainty and insecurity by defining actions aimed at influencing the government or public opinion as “political activity,” a concept that is left deliberately vague.¹² While universities have not been targeted by this law, such framing has the effect of discouraging impact-oriented research.

Apart from implicit obstacles, there have been several instances when different state actors interfered directly with academic activities. For instance, in 2016, the European University at St. Petersburg (EUSP) lost its license to conduct educational activities and in 2018 state accreditation was withdrawn for the Moscow School of Social and Economic Sciences (Shaninka). While the EUSP regained its license in July 2018, it remains without state accreditation. The reasons behind both universities’ problems are unclear. In addition to the culture of distrust and bureaucratic oversight, the independent thinking and critical research pursued at these institutions may have contributed

to their being subjected to pressure. The EUSP has been described by scholars as an “exemplary victim” (R27) and as an instance of systematic discrimination against private research universities by the Russian state (Guba and Zavadskaja 2017).

The state has not only confronted institutions, but also individual scholars. These cases have been ascribed to scholars’ political non-conformity or critical attitude toward Russia’s authorities or Russia’s foreign policy. Sergei Guriev, rector of the Moscow New Economic School, who helped write a report criticizing the prosecution of Mikhail Khodorkovsky, left Russia for an academic career in France in 2013. The following year, Andrei Zubov, philosophy professor at the Moscow State Institute of International Relations (MGIMO University), was dismissed after comparing Russia’s annexation of Crimea to Nazi Germany’s Anschluss of Austria in 1938.¹³ Even if these cases are infrequent and there has been no coordinated effort to undermine academic freedom, the signals sent by various state institutions may be interpreted by scholars as a warning that critical engagement with the policymaking process is not welcomed.

In liberal democracies, the dissemination of research results to non-academic audiences is considered an important element of generating impact. In contemporary Russia, this process, too, is hampered. Institutions loyal to the state, such as state television channels, have been interfering with communicating research to the broader public.¹⁴

In the realm of the social sciences and humanities, the disciplines in which scholars have most potential for informing foreign policy, the state’s absence creates an additional disincentive for policy engagement. One example is the Presidential Award for Young Scholars in the Field of Science and Innovations. Established in 2008, it is meant to recognize outstanding scholarly work. However, since its inception, only two scholars have received it for work in the humanities and social sciences. In 2018, Andrei Fursenko, presidential advisor, noted that it was difficult to find “valuable work” in the humanities, a comment that testifies to a very limited, yet judgmental and excessively critical engagement of bureaucrats with academic production.¹⁵

In the realm of the so-called “mega grants” the Russian government awards for research projects, which last up to three years with a budget of up to 90 million rubles (US\$1.5 million), the situation is only slightly better. In 2017, out of 35 mega-grants, only two were awarded in the humanities and social sciences.¹⁶ In addition, the community of social science researchers was disappointed by the decision taken in 2016 to merge the fund for sponsoring research in social sciences and humanities, the Russian Humanist Scientific Fund (Rossiiskii gumanitarnyi nauchnyi fond, RGNF) with the Russian Fund for Basic Research (Rossiiskii fond fundamental’nykh issledovaniy, RFFI).

Institutional arrangements and career advancement rules in Russian academia are not designed to mobilize scholars

to do policy-relevant research or to seek dissemination of their research results beyond academia, as the following excerpts from interviews show:

In our grant system, there is no such expectation for research to have policy impact. The main goal is to gain knowledge, provide theoretical input. Knowledge should be practical, but not political. (R28)

One significant obstacle for research to reach policy-makers is the lack or unpopularity of a policy paper format. The second factor is the lack of motivation structure for academics to be policy-relevant or to work with impact. (R5)

The first statement shows there is weariness with regard to research and/or its dissemination that may be interpreted as having a political agenda. The second points mainly to institutional obstacles, in particular the lack of an adequate reward system (compare Forrat 2016).

THE INSTITUTIONAL FRAMEWORK FOR COOPERATION

Factors that discourage scholars from active participation in the public debate and from engagement with the foreign-policy-making process appear to stand in stark contrast to the relatively rich institutional setting for knowledge exchange between expert community and the government.

The opening of the political system after the dissolution of the Soviet Union made it possible to establish a number of IR research and teaching centers beyond the capital. In the Soviet period, Russian IR was limited to a handful of centers in Moscow, including the Moscow State Institute of International Relations (MGIMO), and the Russian Academy of Sciences' Institute of World Economy and International Relations (IMEMO), Institute of the US and Canada (ISKAN), and Institute of Europe (Lebedeva 2013). These centers, even if few in number, employed quite a substantial number of researchers. In 1987, IMEMO employed 600 scholars, and ISKAN around 150 scholars (Schneider 1987). How influential these centers were, when it comes to foreign policy, is still subject to debates. Some argue that IMEMO played an instrumental role in designing the ideational background and concrete policy options for perestroika (Checkel 1997).¹⁷

Contemporary legal ramifications of the foreign-policy-making process are not conducive to the participation of non-state actors in agenda-setting or policymaking processes. Article 86 of the Russian constitution makes the president, rather than the government or prime minister, responsible for Russia's foreign and security policy. By extension, the presidential administration is at least as important as the Ministry of Foreign Affairs in foreign-policy planning and implementation.

The framework of the Open Government program inaugurated by the then-president Dmitry Medvedev in early 2012 allowed for the creation of the Expert Council affiliated with the government (*Ekspertnyi sovet pri pravitelstve*) and public councils linked to specific ministries (*Obshchestvennye sovery*). This reform laid the institutional foundation for knowledge exchange involving scholars, non-academic experts, and state officials. While the Expert Council affiliated with the government provides advice on such areas as economic and social policy, the domain of foreign and security policy is outside of its competences.¹⁸ No public council is linked to the Ministry of Foreign Affairs.¹⁹ The minister of foreign affairs holds meetings with the Scientific Council (*Nauchnyi Sovet*) to discuss current international affairs but little information is publicly available concerning the composition or specific tasks of this council.²⁰ The Council for International Law, established in 2009 and composed of international legal scholars, is formally affiliated with this ministry, but according to publicly available data, it last convened in 2011.²¹ Once a year, the minister of foreign affairs meets with the representatives of Russia's not-for-profit organizations. At such a meeting held in 2018, Sergei Lavrov described the practice as aimed at the "exchange of views on issues of mutual interest for the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and our non-profit organizations (...)." ²² A Public Council (*Obshchestvennyi Sovet*) affiliated with the Ministry of Defense has existed since 2006.²³ Vladimir Putin's third presidential term reinforced the contrast between a relatively rich institutional structure for knowledge exchange and officials' growing uneasiness with expert input. The fourth term seems to be continuing that trend, especially with the scrapping of the ministerial post supervising the Open Government initiative.²⁴

The lack of well-developed legal ramifications is accompanied by a relatively weak position of universities as centers for knowledge and expertise production rather than for teaching. While the break-up of the Soviet Union freed Russian academia from the ideological straitjacket, the ensuing economic decline had a profoundly negative impact on state funding in the social sciences and the humanities. It left these disciplines weakened materially and in terms of status (Dubrovskiy 2017; Sokolov et al. 2015). During the 1990s, academia was largely stripped of its elite position. Its authority was tarnished as a result of its previous enforced intellectual entanglement with Soviet Marxism-Leninism (Kharkhordin 2015) (R7),²⁵ and the sudden divorce from the Soviet state ideology caused a profound ideational void (Mäkinen 2014, 87; Sergounin 2009). A number of hasty reforms further undermined the status of academic expertise. Political science, for instance, emerged largely as a result of renaming the departments of scientific communism, rather than according to a plan of how to advance knowledge in that area (Golosov 2016).

Despite the growing number of IR departments, their role has remained focused primarily on teaching (Lebedeva 2006). Meanwhile, the institutes of the Russian Academy of Sciences have maintained their links with the policymaking world. For instance, the RAS Institute of Europe, through an officially established position of liaison officers, cooperates with the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and provides policy briefings upon the ministry's request (R31).

The mushrooming of think-tanks, private analytical centers, and so-called *polit-tekhnologs* in the 1990s blurred the boundaries between research, advocacy, and propaganda. Academic assessments of this phenomenon and the role of think-tanks specializing in foreign policy vary. Most of my interviewees agreed that the landscape is heterogeneous. Some respondents were skeptical about the influence of think-tanks on the policymaking process and were inclined to describe their task as the justification and legitimization of policy choices and decisions made by the political center without any external input. As one respondent put it: "They [think-tanks] are like clubs for people who pretend to be policy-related. ... They try to sense the atmosphere but their work is like 'steam into the whistle'" (R27). Many respondents emphasized that think-tank experts play a role primarily in maintaining the status quo, adapting their claims to the political situation and following the official discourse: "Experts sniff for demand from the Kremlin, what it is that they want. ... Think-tanks usually justify what Russia already did" (R20); "Expertise that is close to the power center supports the status quo" (R22). Some identified ideology as playing a more important role than expertise for think-tanks specializing in international politics (R5).²⁶

The early-2000s were a period of increased demand and supply of expertise. Economic recovery freed up resources while the pool of experts, including with international university experience, grew. The 2002 saw the establishment of the journal *Rossia v globalnoi politike* (Russia in Global Politics), which aims to shape Russian expert discourse on foreign policy and international politics in a way similar to the journal *Foreign Affairs* in the United States. The Valdai Club was inaugurated in 2004 with a mission to connect policymakers, including top leadership, with Russian and foreign experts.

The period of the "tandem"—that is, Dmitry Medvedev's presidency and Vladimir Putin's premiership during 2008–2012—opened more space for scholarly voices (Efremenko 2017). In 2010, the Russian International Affairs Council (RIAC) was established, and subsequently developed a policy of cooperating with a broad pool of experts, including academics (R30). Two factors stimulated greater openness. First, the existence of two centers of power resulted in a system more pluralistic and open to external advice. Second, greater financial capabilities allowed for the sponsoring of diverse academic initiatives. One example is the Northern Dimension Institute, a university network established in 2009 with the aim of informing policies in the Baltic region. The idea for the institute

originated in the academic realm, but it necessitated the support of foreign-policy practitioners to be implemented as a multilateral research network (R9).²⁷

Thanks to studies published by Russia-based scholars as well as fieldwork-informed analysis, we know more about the role of expertise in domestic politics (Malinova 2017; Sungurov 2015, 2017; Sungurov, Raspopov, and Beliaev 2012a, 2012b). These analyses show that experts face a number of obstacles. Working for domestic government structures, they have some flexibility in their policy-oriented advice, but there is also an implicit mutual understanding of what the limits of their autonomy are (Sungurov 2017, 11). Experts may also be expected to deliver according to the "paid-for result" model (*model' oplachennogo rezul'tata*), which means their role is reduced to confirming and legitimizing a predetermined course of action rather than advising on it (Sungurov 2015). Even the existence of a legal requirement to involve independent expertise does not prove sufficient as government structures strive to maintain control over what experts deliver (Sungurov 2017, 12). When it comes to the evaluation of a specific policy, "under current Russian conditions, this evaluation, as a rule, is under control" (Sungurov 2017, 12). Experts occupying high-level positions at universities and the RAS (*statusnye eksperty*) may be restricted in expressing their views because of wariness that excessive criticism of the authorities might harm their institutions and people who work there. Experts working within governmental structures (*vnutri vlastnykh struktur*), tend to prioritize the bureaucratic rule of subordination over the delivery of critical analysis (Sungurov 2017, 12–13).²⁸ With respect to civic groups such as socially oriented NGOs, their expertise is harnessed by the government but their participation is controlled (Owen and Bindman 2017).

With regard to Russia's foreign policy, the literature generally considers the influence of non-state actors, including academia, an exception rather than a rule (Lo 2015; Mankoff 2011; Trenin and Lo 2005). As one author puts it:

Russian authorities ignore the possibilities of dialogue with Western political-security experts in such forums as the Munich Security Conference, as they deem these experts completely irrelevant. Such a stance results from transposing onto the West the way things work in Russia, where experts are not asked about foreign policy. All that is expected from them is to justify the foreign policy course adopted at the very top. (Gabuev 2018)

English-language studies suggest that academic impact on foreign policy may, to some extent, be effectuated through teaching.²⁹ The only two aspects where the literature admits scholars may play a more direct role, are ideational inspiration and policy rationalization (Lo 2015, 5–7). *Mezhdunarodniki*, high-profile foreign policy experts, including but not limited to academics, are often presented as following the official line or as the "guardians" (*okhraniteli*) of the regime whose motivation may vary from genuine persuasion to opportunism (Shevtsova 2017).³⁰ Scholarly and policy discourses have been described as mutually constitutive (Makarychev and

Morozov 2013, 330) or co-evolving (Omelicheva and Zubyska 2016, 42). The view that IR scholarship in Russia may be “policy-based evidence-making” rather than “evidence-based policymaking” is quite common.³¹

HOW SCHOLARS VIEW THEIR IMPACT ON FOREIGN-POLICY MAKING

Scholars employed at the Russian Academy of Sciences see engagement with the policy world, for instance the preparation of policy briefs, as part of their obligations to their employer (R28, R32). In contrast, university-based academics in general do not perceive their research in terms of policy relevance, although they too may be asked to provide research to government bodies (R17). This difference in the identification of roles may be attributed to a traditional, but changing, division of labor between universities, which are primarily responsible for teaching, and the RAS, charged with the task of creating and disseminating knowledge.

Respondents agreed on a number of issues regarding the link between scholarly knowledge and policymaking. They share the view that the decision-making process is highly centralized and non-transparent. Key areas of foreign-policy making are, in the view of the interviewed scholars, handled by the Presidential Administration rather than by the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, and on many occasions by the president himself. However, scholars who have had the experience of interacting with consultative bodies, like the Russian International Affairs Council, and with foreign policy practitioners, recognize that—despite limited room for criticism—there exist some entry points for their expertise. They also agree that demand for and openness toward such expertise has not been constant but rather subject to change over time and with respect to topic areas.

Some respondents described the end of the 1990s and the beginning of the 2000s as a “golden age” when it was possible not only to make suggestions but also to see them implemented in policy practice or state legislation. References to this perceived influence have been recorded in academic writing. For instance, Yuri Borko describes how a team of scholars affiliated with MGIMO and RAS was commissioned by the government and the Central Bank with preparing a report concerning the euro currency and Russia’s national interests (Borko and Butorina 2001). Recommendations of this report were translated into legal solutions (R28).

The golden age of academic expertise of the early 2000s is usually linked to the fast pace of European integration. Not only did the European Union (EU) introduce a single currency, but it was about to significantly broaden its membership and discussed a constitutional treaty. It was increasingly more difficult for bureaucrats in Russia to evaluate developments in the EU with respect to Russia’s politics and economy. Knowledge inside Russian legislative and executive bodies on the workings

of the EU was partial (Gretskiy, Treshchenkov, and Golubev 2014) (R28, R30). These circumstances increased the demand for academic expertise that would be comprehensive and accessible. Taking this context into account, authors working on the first textbook on European integration intended it not only for students but also for civil servants. The textbook prepared by scholars from the RAS Institute of Europe and MGIMO (Borko and Butorina 2001) was not only promoted among bureaucrats but physically distributed to various ministries (R28).

In 2005, IR academics assessed the value of their contribution to the state’s development very highly. Andrei and Pavel Tsygankov wrote:

Without purposeful efforts of the academic community of IR scholars, it will hardly be possible for Russia to become a fully-fledged member of the world, nor will it be capable of profiting from globalization, while avoiding its many traps. (Tsygankov and Tsygankov 2005, 382)

It was at that time, however, that the evolution of Russia’s political system started to be perceived as limiting the space for scholarly contribution to the policymaking process. One of the interviewed scholars provides the following explanation:

Since the 2000s the regime has become more and more centralized, which also means it has become less interested in finding actual solutions to concrete problems. (R5)

Respondents recognize that policy practitioners’ openness toward academic expertise largely depends on the particular subject or topic at hand. Demand for experts’ advice peaked during the process of establishing the Eurasian Economic Union, due to the fact that its legal and institutional construction was to a large extent based on the EU model:

We all advised the government on the EEU—we were telling the government how the EU worked. (R9)

Some scholars compare their positive experiences of knowledge-sharing with the situation developing in the late-2000s, when centralization and the subordination of regional decision making to Moscow resulted in fast-dwindling demand for the expertise on the EU at the regional governance level (R19). On the other hand, scholars now see greater openness on the part of regional authorities to advice concerning the Arctic (R29).

The dominant view among respondents is that the government is more eager to require and use expertise with regard to the economy rather than foreign policy. Some academics attribute this development to the fact that the government considers foreign policy an important propaganda resource. It is seemingly less precise than economics and potential errors and misjudgments will either not be immediately visible, can be concealed with appropriate rhetoric or even presented as success stories (R27).

The existence of formal channels of knowledge diffusion does not immediately translate into impact. Respondents agree that one of the most prevalent problems characterizing the link between expertise and the state is the absence of feedback from policy-makers. The following quotation is representative of this broadly shared perception: “Who will guarantee that it will be read by anyone” (R25). Interviewees emphasized the lack of communication after their input had been delivered: “Your work enters a black-box, there will be no feedback” (R30); “Once recommendations reach the government, no one knows what happens to them. ... we don’t know how this expertise is processed and used” (R21); “There are institutions that collect information. Scholars do not know, however, what happens next. ... You never know how information you gather will be used” (R25).

According to some respondents, foreign-policy practitioners perceive scholarly expertise as too distant from “real politics” and too sterile to be translated into concrete policies (R29). Practitioners feel strongly that their participation in diplomatic exchanges grants them a unique vantage point for understanding foreign affairs. Academic expertise seems to be of lesser value by the very fact that it is produced by a community that is removed from the daily practices of diplomacy. As one scholar put it, “The government perceives the academic knowledge as distant and irrelevant: you academics have no idea how we really work” (R8).

In addition, a perception fairly widespread among respondents is that in matters of foreign policy, the government relies primarily on information provided by intelligence services. It is believed that bureaucrats dealing with foreign affairs have a preference for “first-hand” knowledge that either they themselves possess due to their professional engagement in diplomacy or that they can obtain via intelligence networks (R30). It is possible to stipulate that bureaucrats involved in policymaking and implementation share the belief that intelligence provides an accurate and true picture of events. It is the source of reliable information that is transmitted almost in real time. Lack of access to these sources of information automatically diminishes the value of academic expertise in the eyes of policy practitioners. More importantly, however, it shows that policy practitioners may not be drawing a clear distinction between information, analysis, and policy planning.

In the eyes of respondents, trusted individuals have a privileged access to policy practitioners and are regarded as more influential than institutions formally tasked with expert advice. As one respondent put it: “Those who work with presidential administration to prepare, for instance, large economic or political fora are not recruited in an open competition; this is by invitation only” (R25). Respondents perceive that expertise has become personalized, with particular individuals having better reputation than an entire institution. One interviewee sought the roots of this personalization in the early 1990s, when institutional patterns of communication between scholars and the Communist Party broke down and politicians started relying on personal connections (R6).

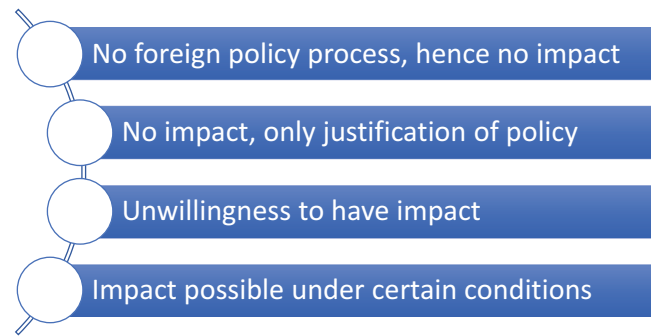


FIGURE 1 The spectrum of views concerning potential impact of scholarly expertise on foreign policy.

IMPACT: THE SPECTRUM OF OPINIONS

In addition to aspects of policy impact that scholars agree on, there are certain issues on which the views of respondents diverge and oscillate between highly skeptical and cautiously optimistic. These views can be classified into four groups and illustrated with the help of a simple graph (see Figure 1).

No Foreign-Policy Process, Hence No Impact

The most skeptical view expressed by respondents who admitted they had never had contact with policy practitioners is that no policymaking process takes place in Russia. As a result, there can be no possibility for scholarly contribution of any kind (R27). These scholars see foreign-policy making as limited to state officials and openly excluding societal actors such as think-tanks, experts, and academics. This skeptical view rests on the assumption that, if there is only one decision maker, we should discount processes that are usually involved in the elaboration of specific policies, including agenda setting and the discussion of key goals and ways of achieving them (R8, R27, R33).

No Impact, Only Justification of Policy

Some respondents opine that academics are often required to step in to fill in policy slogans with content rather than invited to participate in the process of policy formulation. This, according to one respondent, was the case with Dmitry Medvedev’s security doctrine proposed in 2008 and the European Security Treaty presented in 2009 (R32). Some experts may have a role in adding new terms to the overall vocabulary, but without much influence on the substance of actual policies that would follow their introduction. One respondent described this activity as throwing in new terminology (*vbrasyvat’ novye terminy*) (R32). Academics recognize that having a role in the creation of discourse is not equal to actual foreign-policy making. It may, however, as some observe, indirectly contribute to identity

building, especially if these terms aim to position Russia on the world stage in a specific way.

Unwilling to Have Impact

Another group of respondents considers impact possible but consciously withdraws from participation. There are at least two reasons scholars provide for this approach. Some perceive that the claim to authority in the academic realm hinges upon their successful presentation as objective and *apolitical* (R17).³² They see any engagement with policymaking as dangerously undermining their objectivity. These scholars are not interested in providing expertise, on the grounds that thinking in terms of policy impact would harm or contaminate science (R17, R26). For others, impact and policy advice are simply not considered worthy of academic engagement. These scholars prefer to invest their efforts either in teaching or in scholarly production. Some aim for international academic recognition rather than for policy impact:

Due to the fact that Soviet social sciences lagged behind (*otstavanie sotsialnykh nauk*), it is now appreciated when people get recognition in the West. This is why we constantly think what type of research will be interesting for other scholars and not for policymakers. (R24)

There are also those who see providing policy advice as primarily directed at self-promotion. As one interviewee put it: “If experts or academics work with politicians, this means they themselves want to become politicians, deputies or work for the Ministry of Foreign Affairs” (R1).

An important reason for avoiding engagement with the policymaking process is its lack of transparency. One interviewee described a case he was familiar with where a non-academic with no particular knowledge of a region or its languages was commissioned with writing an expert report on the region’s politics. The respondent described it as an instance of corruption, benefiting the commissioning civil servant, the intermediary, and the provider of “expert analysis” (R33).

Finally, a few scholars decline participation on the grounds that the political system currently in place is not one they would like to assist with the use of their data or knowledge. They withdraw because they are critical of the undemocratic outlook of contemporary politics in Russia (R8, R35).

Impact Possible under Certain Conditions

The less skeptical attitude recognizes that IR scholars usually share the ambition to have some leverage in the realm of foreign policy. In this group, the willingness to have impact goes hand in hand with the realization of obstacles. Some scholars are caught between their desire

to contribute and the awareness of the limited room for their expertise. One respondent put it in the following way:

It is not that criticizing current state policies has become impossible. It is just that such a critical voice is effectively muted, it does not exist. If it tries to re-appear, it gets criticized as unpatriotic. This is why there is little desire to offer alternatives. ... Don’t rock the boat (*ne podryvat’ lodku*) ...; don’t meddle with identity questions (*ne vmeshivat’sia v voprosy identichnosti*). ... Rather than criticize, the academic sphere is expected to adjust (*podstroivat’ ne kritikovat’*). (R3)

Growing intolerance of the state toward criticism of foreign policy narrows down the avenues for scholarly engagement and limits their potential input: “Following the official line is more important than genuine expertise grounded in data analysis” (R4). However, a group of respondents that does not feel paralyzed by those difficult circumstances maintains that although policymaking is highly centralized, there are ways to participate and contribute meaningfully to this process. This group agrees that participation is possible only under certain conditions:

You need to find the appropriate level in order to bring some value added. It needs to be bigger than day-to-day operationalization of foreign policy, where you cannot compete with bureaucrats and intelligence. Neither can it be too general; your advice needs to be possible to operationalize. (R30)

Other elements to consider in order to gain impact are identifying the most appropriate topic and assessing potential demand. One interviewee distinguished clearly between following the official line and fitting into the official agenda, suggesting that while the former is not desirable, the latter is key (R39). Timing is considered crucial when planning to contribute, which is illustrated by the following interview excerpts:

With the action in Syria in 2017, all decision-makers have thought that it is the culmination and Russia’s success. But it turned out that there is no endgame in sight, we have no exit strategy. It is then when bureaucrats became more open to outside ideas. (R30)

Academic knowledge matters only when it is timely and when specific ideas fit the hot agenda. (R39)

Respondents consider that a window of opportunity may also open in advance of a high-level state visit or summit as well as when a new government is elected in a country deemed important to Russia’s foreign policy. The format of the contribution is key: ‘The higher you go, the shorter your brief should be. This is art in its own right, to be short but substantive’ (R30).

It is also crucial to identify the right entry point:

This is not always the highest level, because top-level decision-makers may simply delegate the issue to someone else and you lose track of it. The thing may as well disappear from the agenda altogether. You have to find the right recipients. (R30)

In addition, demand for expert knowledge may arise when the state administration is faced with an entirely new, unexpected and complex situation or when scenarios it had planned fail. The recent instances include the euro crisis and the migration crisis in the EU (R28).

Respondents who want to have impact are willing to pragmatically use tactics that have proven effective in drawing practitioners' attention. For instance, when proposing a new idea, it is considered important to refer to a statement by president Putin on a given matter. As one interviewee confessed: "To do this successfully I needed to make a reference to what Vladimir Putin had said" (R9). Such strategic quoting is seen as necessary to persuade lower and mid-level bureaucrats not to dismiss ideas straight away (R9).

At the same time, scholars recognize that their role is difficult because, in their view, foreign-policy practitioners have a simplified view of academic expertise: "Foreign-policy practitioners regard International Relations as a new discipline that is excessively influenced by Western ideas" (R19).

Another group of scholars views expertise delivery in economic terms. Expertise they provide needs to "sell," which also means it needs to respond to specific demand. They act as "entrepreneurial subjects," to borrow Natalie Koch's phrase (Koch 2016). For them, gaining entry into the policymaking process and the provision of expertise for the state is necessary to keep their institutions afloat in budgetary terms, especially if the institution in question has no permanent line of financing:

Every year I need to find clients for my expertise. I never do what is interesting for us, but what is interesting for the government. These sometimes overlap. The MFA [Ministry of Foreign Affairs] has its own center of analysis and we need to offer something unique. This is tightly linked to my budget. (R39)

The interviews show a wide spectrum of attitudes concerning impact. Opinions diverge on demand and the actual use of expertise. While generally skeptical, some scholars are convinced that achieving impact is impossible. Some declare unwillingness to interact with the policymaking world, and others find providing expert advice difficult but possible under certain conditions.

CONCLUSIONS

This article has discussed the role of IR expertise and the academia-policy nexus in contemporary Russia. While in

many university cultures across Europe, ensuring some relevance of IR scholarship has become a rarely questioned paradigm, to academics in Russia the policy relevance of their work is at best a secondary concern. Scholars share the view that the decision-making process is highly centralized and non-transparent. The most skeptically inclined argue that there can be no meaningful contribution due to the fact that foreign-policy making is centered around the figure of the president. Ambiguity on the part of scholars with respect to the policy impact of their work may be attributed to several factors, in particular: (i) the authority of academia as a source of expertise eroded following the break-up of the Soviet Union and the difficulties it faced during the 1990s; (ii) the lack of a policy-impact culture and mechanisms designed to stimulate it; (iii) prevalence of the ethos of scientific activity as detached from the realm of policymaking, mirrored by foreign-policy practitioners' belief that scholarly research is insufficiently related to "real politics"; (iv) a broader political context that stimulates reluctance on the part of some scholars to engage in "political activity" that might potentially endanger their career; (v) scholars' unwillingness to be seen as assisting the state whose system of governance they do not support; (vi) the perception that scholarly expertise may be ignored or manipulated.

Those less skeptical recognize that there exists some room for their expertise and try to identify entry points. For this group the key challenge is that foreign-policy practitioners find it difficult to recognize "external" sources of knowledge on international affairs. Bureaucrats, considering foreign affairs to be their bread and butter, are dismissive of expertise coming from outside of their own circle. Their preference is—in the view of some interviewees—for information delivered by intelligence services. A popular perception among Russian scholars is that policy practitioners value and trust particular individuals and rely on personal ties more than on formal links with academic institutions. The negative side is that those individuals have to constantly prove their trustworthiness and loyalty, which prevents them from articulating criticism.

Those who study the gap between academia and foreign policy in the United States have observed that it has been successfully bridged in many ways, either through the government contracting research or through the mechanism of the "revolving door" between universities and the executive branch. However, studies also note that academics seeking tenure may not be willing to devote time to government service and many do not wish to be identified with official policies or to be exploited for political purposes (Newsom 1995, 66–67), especially for fear of losing intellectual integrity (Parks and Stern 2014, 74). On the basis of the conducted interviews, it is possible to say that these concerns are familiar to scholars in Russia.

Certain "technical" requirements for gaining access to policy practitioners may be similar in both the United States and Russia, for instance the necessity to write in a

short and accessible form, the right timing, the ability to provide quick responses to unexpected events, and readiness to address policy failures (Byman and Kroenig 2016, 305–9). Specific obstacles to scholarly impact on foreign-policy making are also comparable, in particular scholars' lack of familiarity with the peculiar needs of the foreign-policy bureaucracy and the government's vested interest in a policy it had initiated (Byman and Kroenig 2016, 299; Newsom 1995, 55).

While the analysis of the Russian case shows some similarities with issues raised in literature on foreign-policy analysis in the United States, it is nonetheless necessary to take into account a different sociopolitical context. Despite the fact that Russian authorities expect universities to upgrade their position in international rankings, they do not seem eager to broaden their reliance on academic knowledge. On the contrary, many activities of the Russian state have pushed scholars toward greater caution rather than motivated them to share their knowledge. In such a context, providing advice in a form accessible to policy practitioners may be the least of scholarly concerns. Academics share the perception of undervaluing their expertise. Their wariness of expressing too much criticism publicly may lead to further separation of academic experts from the policymaking world.

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NOTES

- 1 See Boswell (2009) for an overview. The thesis about the existence of two completely separate communities—academics, and policy-makers—continues to be challenged by new research (e.g., Newman, Cherney, and Head 2016).
- 2 See, for example, requirements for the Horizon-2020 program and ISA Research Workshop Grants.

- 3 For a discussion of this problematique in Soviet times, see Polsky (1987).
- 4 See also the results of a recent field research analysis concerning the role and influence of civic actors on specific policy processes in Russia (Owen and Bindman 2017).
- 5 In conformity with the ethical requirements of this research, all my interviews were carried out on the principle of anonymity. The interviews were not recorded and the quotations I provide are derived from hand-written notes. I reference my interviews in such a way that no one person can be identified by the date of the meeting or their workplace. To differentiate between the interviews, respondents are marked with a code symbol (R1–R40).
- 6 In some cases the interviewee and I used both languages to make sure we both meant the same thing.
- 7 “Putin postavil zadachu provyshit'sotsial'nyi status rabotnikov nauki” [Putin Set the Task to Raise the Social Status of Science Workers], ITAR-TASS, April 10, 2018, <http://www.interfax.ru/russia/607801> (if not otherwise indicated, all links last accessed on April 11, 2018).
- 8 Presidential address delivered on the national day of science, February 8, 2018, <http://kremlin.ru/events/president/transcripts/56825>.
- 9 The project's webpage listing aims and expected results: <http://Stop100.com/about/more-about/>. The project is overseen by the Council on Competitiveness Enhancement of Leading Russian Universities among Global Research and Education Centers, <http://Stop100.com/council/>.
- 10 On Turkey, see “As Turkey's Academia Faces Desolation, a Call for Solidarity with Imperiled Scholars” https://www.huffingtonpost.com/entry/as-turkeys-academia-faces-desolation-a-call-for-solidarity_us_58cc8fe8e4b0537abd9570d5 and “Rectors Condemn Attack on Academic Freedom in Turkey,” EUPRIO Blog, 27 July 2016, <http://www.euprio.eu/rectors-condemn-attack-on-academic-freedom-in-turkey/>. In China, Xi Jinping, the Chinese leader, was reported as saying that universities must become the Communist party “strongholds” (<https://www.theguardian.com/world/2016/dec/09/china-universities-must-become-communist-party-strongholds-says-xi-jinping>). On Tajikistan, see Schatz and Heathershaw (2018).
- 11 Cases include: the court decision of 2017 to put Kirill Serebrennikov, an internationally acclaimed film and theater director under house arrest for alleged embezzlement (Amos 2017; Ayres 2017) and the 2018 decision to revoke the distribution license for a British-made historical satire, *The Death of Stalin*. (See also Antonova 2017 and Damberg 2017.) The most recent Annual Report of the Network of Concerned Historians listed cases of censorship of historical research and cultural production in Russia (http://www.concernedhistorians.org/content_files/file/AR/18.pdf, last accessed July 30, 2018).
- 12 For the text of the law, see <https://rg.ru/2012/07/23/nko-dok.html>.
- 13 News reports: <http://www.reuters.com/article/us-ukraine-crisis-professor/russian-professor-sacked-over-criticism-of-actions-in-ukraine-idUSBREA2N1BM20140324> and <https://www.vedomosti.ru/politics/articles/2014/03/24/professor-zubov-uvolen-iz-mgimo>.
- 14 Political scientist Ekaterina Schulmann described her own experience on YouTube: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=7DhwLJ2dn0A>.
- 15 News reports: <https://indicator.ru/news/2018/02/05/premiya-prezidenta-rf-v-oblasti-nauki-i-innovacij/> and <https://philologist.livejournal.com/10046998.html>.
- 16 These grants are open to Russian and foreign scholars. In 2017, the award was granted to a US-based scholar, William Wohlforth, for a project implemented with MGIMO. For news reports on awards granted in 2017, see <http://tass.ru/nauka/4825460> and <https://indikator.ru/news/2017/11/30/pobediteli-shestogo-konkursa-megagranto/>.
- 17 See also a series of articles on the history of IMEMO, published by Petr Cherkasov in the journal *Mirovaia ekonomika i mezhdunarodnye*

otnosheniia since the early 2000s. On relations between IMEMO and Moscow State University (MGU), see Polsky (1987, 101).

- 18 The official webpage of the Open Government framework is at http://open.gov.ru/expert_sovet/.
- 19 For a list of councils, see <http://open.gov.ru/os/os/>.
- 20 For an example of such a meeting, see http://www.mid.ru/foreign_policy/news/-/asset_publisher/cKNonkJE02Bw/content/id/2313196, last accessed 3 October 2018.
- 21 The official webpage of the Council for International Law http://www.mid.ru/activity/coordinating_and_advisory_body/international_law_council.
- 22 A speech by Sergei Lavrov is available at http://www.mid.ru/web/guest/meropriyatiya_s_uchastiem_ministra/-/asset_publisher/xK1BhB2bUjd3/content/id/3260122 (last accessed on September 13, 2018).
- 23 This particular Council was established following a presidential decree of 4 August 2006. Its aims are described at the official webpage: https://function.mil.ru/function/public_board.htm (last accessed on September 13, 2018).
- 24 *Putin Signs Decrees on Appointing New Russian Cabinet Members*, 18 May 2018, <http://tass.com/politics/1005075> (last accessed on July 30, 2018).
- 25 See also a critique of the forms of intellectual production in Soviet humanities and social sciences (Kharkhordin 2015) and a discussion of academic freedom in Soviet times (Dubrovskiy 2017).
- 26 These assessments confirm the findings of a recent report on Russian think-tanks (Pallin and Oxenstierna 2017), which concluded that while the community of think-tanks is diverse, a significant number conveys official narratives promoted by the Russian state.
- 27 The Institute's webpage: <http://www.northerndimension.info/contacts/northern-dimension-institute>
- 28 Sungurov adds that expertise delivered by 'independent' experts is best divided into two parts: that delivered by 'niche' and 'universal' experts (Sungurov 2017). The former have knowledge and experience of a certain issue that may be required by the state at the stage of devising a specific policy. The latter group is labeled as 'TV political analysts' (*telepolitologi*), which is to denote their availability and harmlessness. They can be summoned to provide a commentary that would be neither underpinned by specific knowledge of the topic nor implicate or ridicule decision-makers (Sungurov 2017, 12).
- 29 For instance, it has been argued that geopolitics teaching at universities in Russia provides knowledge that may be used by students in their future careers (Grenier and Hagmann 2016, Mäkinen 2017, 297).
- 30 The term *mezhdunarodniki* (literally an internationalist) as denoting foreign policy and international relations experts emerged in the early-1960s. Before, it referred to party activists whose task was social outreach and explaining to the public the communist party line on international matters (Zimmerman 1969, 43-44).
- 31 It was expressed, for example, in the question and answer sessions at the British International Studies Association, BISA annual conference in Bath 2018.
- 32 The concept of "politicization" has been used very often recently in Russian public discourse and appeared also in interviews. My impression is that its meaning changes and is highly context-dependent.

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